

# Sister Rita Bray, CSC

(Sister M. Celestyn)

August 16, 1940 – June 27, 2024

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These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister M. Adria (Connors), CSC, who also recited them at Sister Rita's funeral on July 3, 2024.

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. I invite us to picture the opening scene from the original movie version of "The Sound of Music": hills, breezes, grassy mounds and a free-spirited person running. The lyrics are, "The hills are alive with the sound of music, with songs they have sung for a thousand years, the hills fill my heart with the sound of music, my heart wants to sing every song it hears." Imagine the scene and think of Rita.

We gather today in this place, in a house built for God, where all are welcome. We gather in prayer for our Sister Rita Bray, who lived a spirit of welcome throughout her life. We gather to reflect on Rita and who she was as a human being. More often people are remembered as a human doing, known for what they did rather than who they were.

When some members of her religious community gathered to reflect and suggest ideas for this resurrection liturgy, deep and significant descriptions of Rita emerged:

easy going - hard worker - personable presence - adventuresome  
gatherer of people - thoughtful - courageous - sensitive to people  
contemplative - intuitive understanding of rural culture - calming  
presence

lover of Scripture - calming presence - comfortable in her  
own presence

a woman of few words - AH, but when she spoke there was a wisdom  
to be heard

Her caregivers on the convent third floor affectionately called Rita “a little hermit,” describing her as a gentle presence who knew everyone by name.

One sister living in Rita’s convent community who knew a little more about Rita than the rest of us shared: “Once, Sister Rita mentioned that her love of God lived in the wildflowers she picked as a little girl. She and her mother used to pick them daily in May for a May altar.”

The chairperson of the board of The Academy of the Holy Cross, Kensington, Maryland, who was a student of Sister Rita, wrote, “Sister Celestyn was incredibly special. She set a very high standard and guided us to reaching it. Not only did she teach us well and warmly, but our knowledge of Latin helped us to understand our worship so much more deeply.”

All that has been said so far has been about Sister Rita Bray as a human being.

After 17 years in education, Sister Rita, along with Sister Julia Marie (Jacomet), CSC, ventured to the rural area of Lancing, Tennessee. This venture sparked to life a greater vibrancy in Sister Rita. Upon their arrival, they spent two years just listening to and learning from the people, talking with folks on the byways, being ones among and with the people. Their intention was to learn and understand the people.

They lived in an old farmhouse, which was standing on piled rocks rather than a cement foundation. It had a porch with rocking chairs and was situated in the middle of a pasture field with farm animals who shared their space and serenaded them. Rita’s oldest brother, Paul, was a Brother of Holy Cross already serving in Lancing, and he became part of this new endeavor.

In collaboration with the Brothers of Holy Cross and other religious congregations, Sister Rita and Sister Julia Marie facilitated the liturgical and catechetical life of St. Ann Parish and other churches in the area, and established community outreach rendering basic services.

In 2006, the sisters left Lansing to serve as co-directors of Angela House of Prayer and Retreat Center in Michigan City, Indiana. For eight years, Sister Rita was responsible for providing hospitality and readying the environment for visiting groups and individuals seeking prayer and renewal. Sister Rita was particularly touched when groups of people who were unhoused would come to the center with Jesuit priests from Chicago, Illinois. Sister Rita's calm and pleasant personality was a welcome asset among the staff, who deeply missed her when she had to leave.

Again, it has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. The image we close with now is that of an earthen vessel. There is a song with these lyrics, "We hold a treasure, not made of gold, in earthen vessels wealth untold. One treasure only, the Lord, the Christ, in earthen vessels."

Sister Rita Bray, as an earthen vessel, plumbed her depth in Christ. To her family present here, her sister Mary by livestream, and her sister JoAnne and nieces and nephews with us, and to her family members among the communion of saints, her parents John and Anna, and her brothers John, Jim and Brother Paul of Holy Cross, we say thank you for sharing your treasured Rita with us.